

Using ATLAS.ti For Extracting The Social Representation Of Kidnapping In Colombia In The Online Media

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Abstract

The article begins by briefly describing what social representation is and introducing the topic of study. The focus however is on the description of how ATLAS.ti was used in the process of analyzing a large volume of data encompassing a period of 6 years including text, image and video documents. Described are the process of coding and the various uses of the network view function including the formation of hypertext and the development of conceptual network views.

Key Words

Social representations, Colombia, ATLAS.ti, extraction of meaning, online media, hypertext, network views, auto-coding, text search

An Introduction To Social Representation

Social representation is concerned with the way we, as social subjects apprehend the events of daily life, the characteristics of our environment, the information surrounding it and the people in our near or distant environment. It is a process by which the brain produces a particular framework of sensory perceptions and mental representations, previously elaborated many times, constructs of reality mirrored by other individuals who have gone through an experience before, or experiences they have been told about. Over time systems and explanations of reality are established that serve as cognitive basis in everyday interaction at home, in the circle of family and friends as well as in the broader cultural context having an effect on education, religion, political and economic status.

Knowledge is understood as being "developed and socially shared" (Jodelet, 1986, p. 473). It is what defines us and makes us special in our behavior, for example as Colombians and sets us apart from others, such as Germans, in aspects of kinesics and prosemic (on issues of body gestures and movements proximity). For instance, in a business meeting the place that each person occupies around a table will have varying importance and meaning; the same applies to the act of offering his/her hand, giving a hug, or one, two or three kisses. The effects that these actions generate are linked to one's perception according to the type of inherent representation and social construction of reality. It is also for this reason that when we travel to other spatial environments, we perceive others differently in their scents, flavors, colors, sounds and aspects of kinetics and prosemic.

Purpose Of The Study

The present study examines whether the theory of social representations can help to understand the ways in which individuals respond actively to the socially constructed representations of kidnappings in

Colombia in the online media during the administrations of President Uribe 2002-2010. The focus especially was on the discourses and practices used by various actors in society and the international community that either defended or condemned negotiations with kidnappers. A third strand that was examined was the military discourse representing an alternative to the problem of kidnapping (see also Rodríguez, 2009). The aim was to reconstruct the social representations of words that appeared to be central when disputes or controversies emerged.

Method

Data Collection

A total of 271 articles from online newspapers, opinions posted on web platforms and official pages related to kidnapping in the years 2002 - 2008 were collected. The document formats included text, images as well as video files. All data were added to an ATLAS.ti project (Figure 1). At the bottom right of the window you see the total number of documents entered, the icons and media type indicate the document format (rich text, image, video).

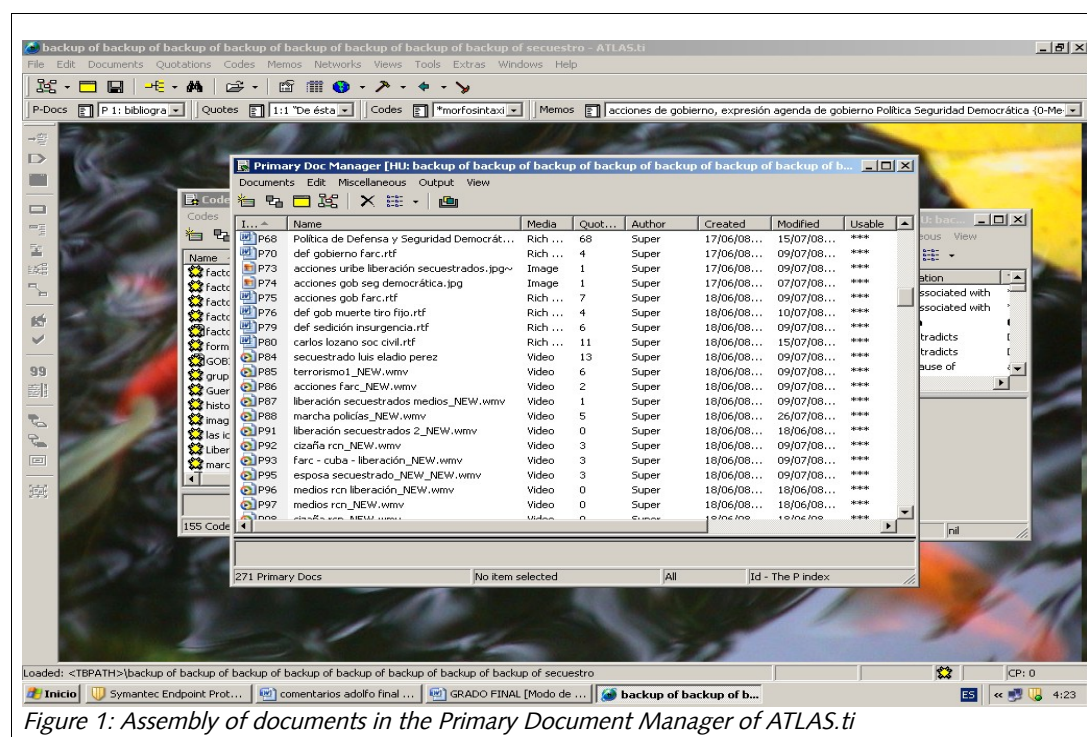


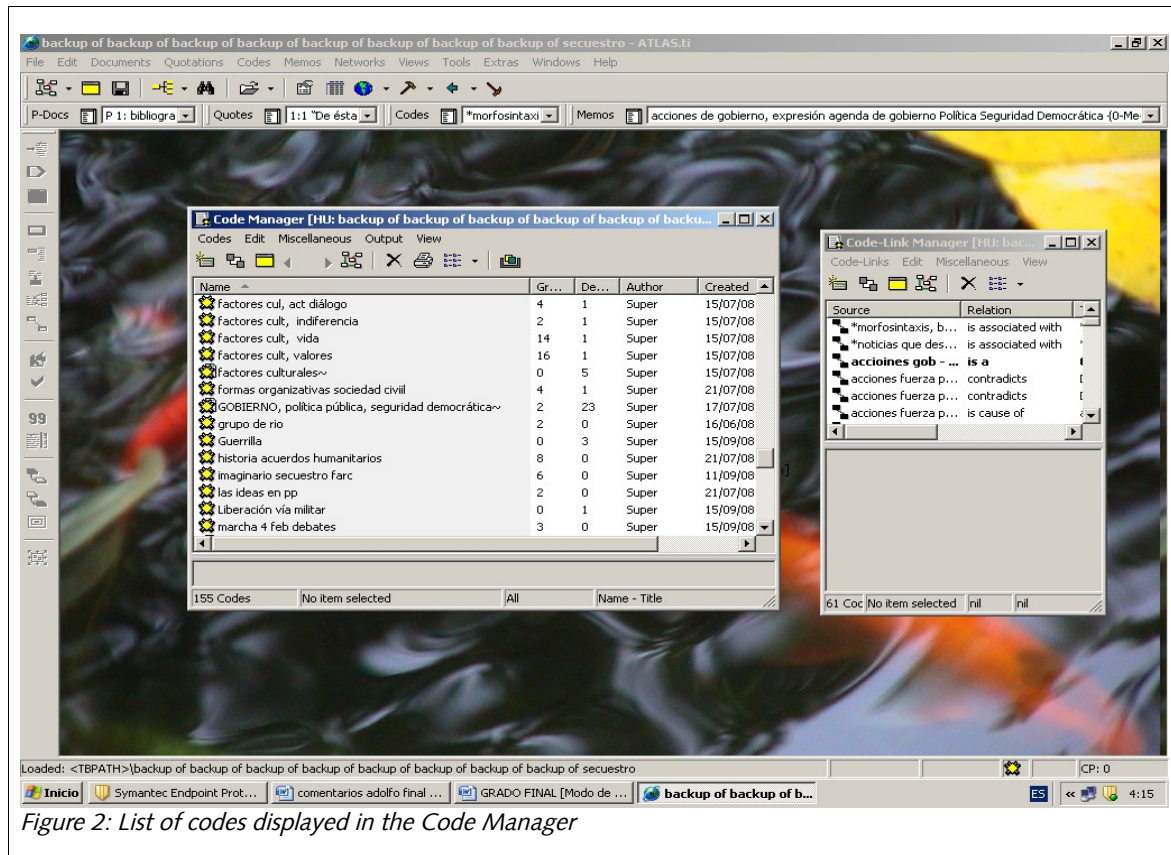
Figure 1: Assembly of documents in the Primary Document Manager of ATLAS.ti

Data Analysis

Text Search & Auto-Coding

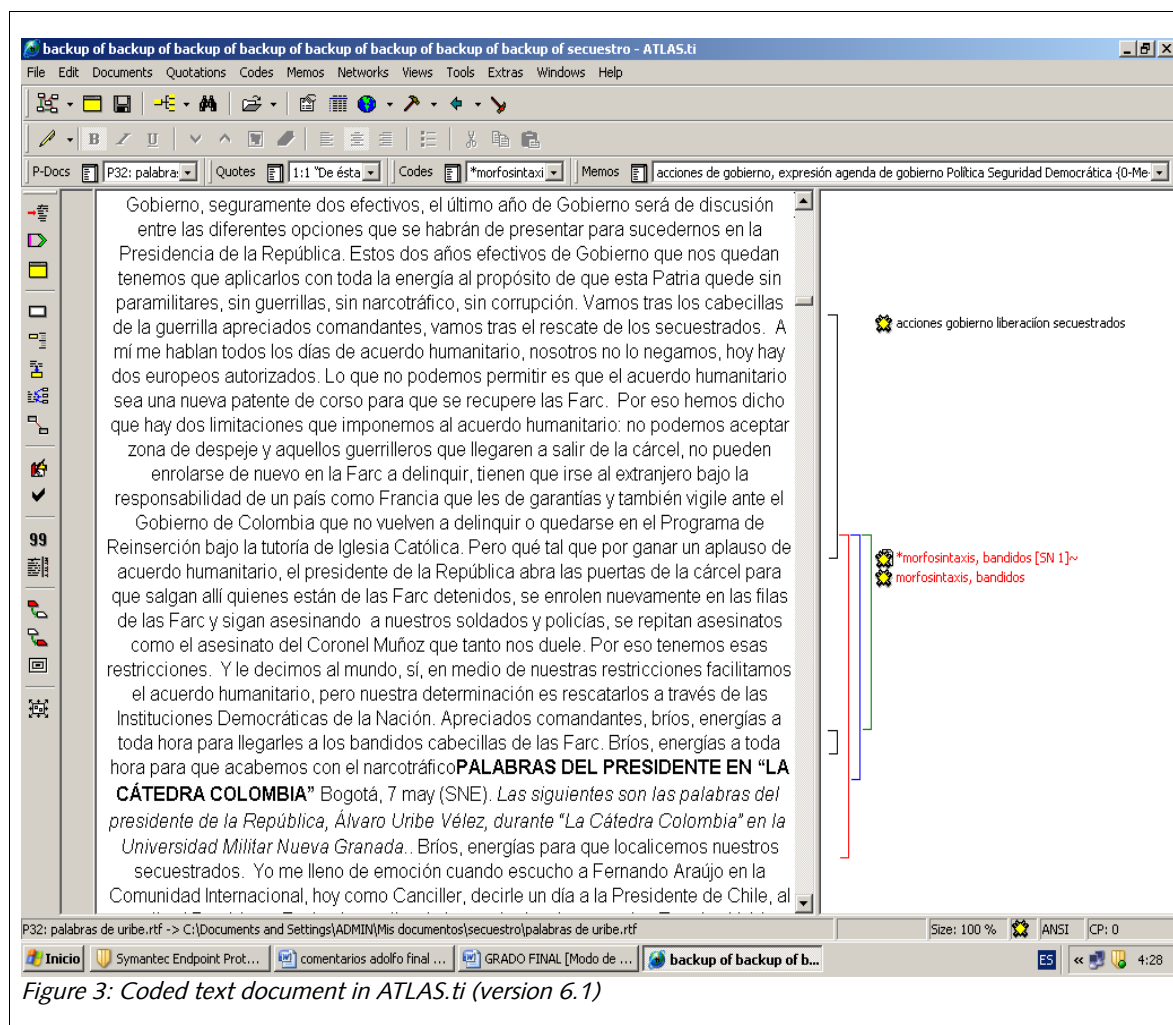
The data analysis was started with searching for words like kidnapping, insurgency, terrorism, paramilitary, humanitarian agreement, democratic security, civil society, and others according to the culture and the particular context studied. The hits were automatically coded by the software. This allowed to focus on the relevant pieces of data by retrieving the coded data segments and to reread them. At this stage of the analysis, the data was not yet interpreted, rather I limited myself to document and reconstruct to what had been said by others. This allowed me to identify positive, negative and neutral construction used by the social actors, revealing the symbolic monitoring of the representation it contained.

Continuous Coding



The central procedure for monitoring the mentioned meanings that was used was the method of constant comparison between data, facts and meanings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). ATLAS.ti helped in systematizing the information through coding and to reach conceptual saturation. In the process of tracking meanings, conceptual saturation was reached when no new topics of significance arose. Based on this procedure, 155 codes were developed (Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows primary document number 32 and a part of a speech by President Alvaro Uribe and a few coded segments. The first one has been coded with the code 'actions of government for the freedom of hostages':



Working with Network Views

The network view function was used in various ways for this study, for instance to illustrate coding. In Figure 4 the code "social construction of kidnapping, extortion," is illustrated by one of the linked quotation representing its meaning:

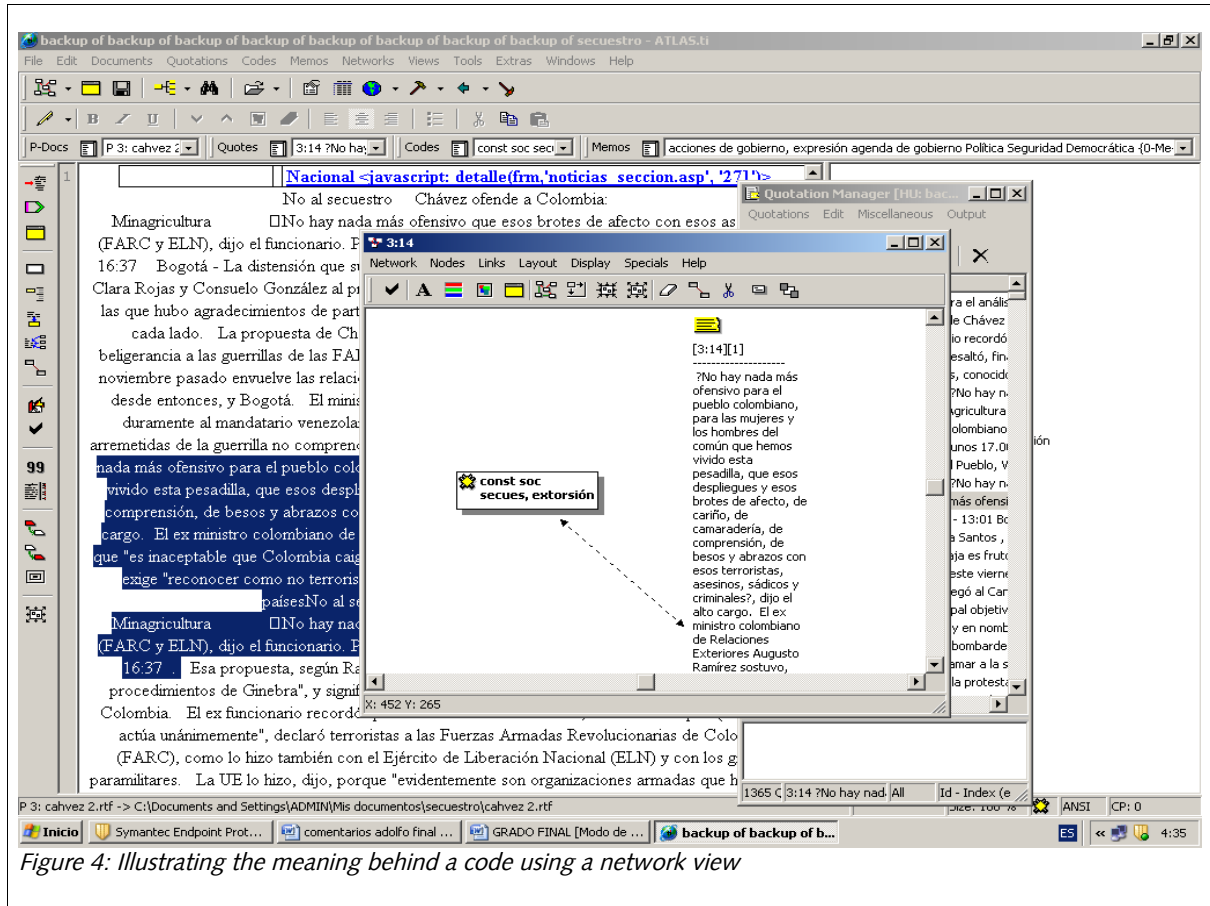


Figure 4: Illustrating the meaning behind a code using a network view

Hyperlinking

As it turned out, the various data sources used in this study (text, image and video documents) provided different takes on the subject, some were confirming, others in contradiction to each other. The possibility to link the multifaceted voices with images and written text allowed for developing a hypertext that raised the level of understanding of the studied phenomenon. The following is an example of such a hypertext.

Criminals coming out of jail (attached to the idea of) if we would allow humanitarian agreement (attached to the idea of) whether the bandits obtain freedom (connected to the idea of) new murders from our soldiers and policemen (attached to the idea of) bandits from FARC make fun of Colombian people.

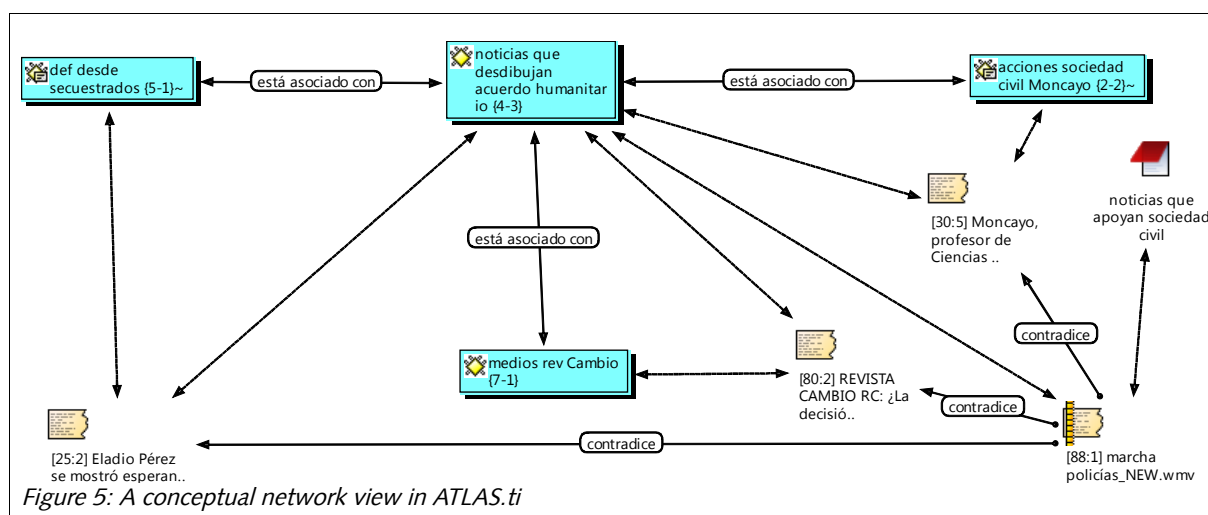
Hyperlinks in ATLAS.ti can be created at document level but also illustrated in network views (Figure 5). A third way of using the network view function was to link codes to each other on a conceptual level using semantic relations. For the present study the following relations were used:

Is a: when the characteristics found were relevant for the process of construction;

Is part of: when the characteristics found were considered accessories to a category but not on the conceptual level

Associated with: when establishing relations between categories

Contradicts: when there was a contradiction between codes or data segments



In Figure 5 above the **'the is associated with'** relation was used to link various codes; the **'contradicts'** relation was used at data level linking quotations: The videos segment 88:1 for instance offered contradictory information to what was said in the text quotations 30:5, 80:2 and 25:2. With a click on the quotations in the network view, the original source files can be accessed and the video segment can be played.

From the 155 codes developed, a number of conceptual maps were prepared that condensed the material and allowed me to look at the internal logic of each category and how it relates to others - establishing particular densities of meanings. In the findings, I could demonstrate how the interests of the actors being part of the discourses and practices converge on kidnapping.

Summary

The theory of social representation proofed to be useful in determining the symbolic meaning contained in the speeches of the actors and social groups studied; how they justify their practices, building their social realities and restoring their beliefs. ATLAS.ti supported the process in various ways. After collecting the data on the theme of interest and adding them to a project file, the text search and auto-coding feature of the software was used to code for main topics. Based on these, emerging concepts were coded in the pre-sorted data that allowed for a comparison of data, facts and meaning, steadily approaching a new conceptualization of reality. After passing the coding stage, the constructed frames of meaning were further elaborated through building network views. Codes and quotations were linked via semantic rela-

tions illustrating the various beliefs and interests. The results were written up in form of an ethnographic report (Rodríguez, 2009) in which the author allowed the voices of the actors to emerge from their discourses using direct quotes retrieved by ATLAS.ti accompanied by the researcher's reflections and interpretation.

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